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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000458

SIPDIS

REFTEL: 03 KATHMANDU 2129

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [SCUL](#) [NP](#)

SUBJECT: MAOISTS INTENSIFY ABDUCTION OF STUDENTS

1. Summary. Nepal's Maoist insurgents have intensified abductions of students. Nearly 700 students were abducted in January and February alone while over 900 reportedly were abducted since the ceasefire's collapse in August 2003. According to one Maoist-affiliated organization, the insurgents intend to raise an army of child militants by mid-May 2004. One prominent Nepali human rights activist, however, believes that the Maoists are trying to indoctrinate Nepal's youth and perhaps recruit children as porters, messengers, and other manual laborers. Most of the abducted students have been released after only a few days of captivity, indicating that the abductions may be an effort to "re-educate" school children. Ironically, the policy of the Royal Nepal Army of not attacking schools may have encouraged the Maoists to use them for recruitment. Nepal's human rights organizations have denounced these activities. End Summary.

Abduction of Students Intensifies

2. Since the beginning of 2004, the Maoists have increasingly resorted to kidnapping students in large numbers from the schools of Nepal's mid-western and far-western regions. Press reports suggest that nearly 700 students were abducted in January and February alone. The Informal Sector Service Center (INSEC), a prominent human rights organization, calculates that Maoists have abducted approximately 900 students over the past six months as compared to only 137 students abducted during the 7-month long ceasefire in 2003 (January-August 27).

3. According to media and NGO accounts, Achham District in far-western Nepal was particularly hard-hit by the Maoists: 13 Dalit, or low-caste, girls were abducted and enlisted into the Maoist armed force the week of January 18; 150 students were abducted on January 8; and another 153 students were abducted on February 1, but all were later released after attending Maoist "cultural programs." Sixty-two schools in Achham District reportedly have closed indefinitely as a result of the Maoist abductions. Rolpa District in the mid-west has also suffered: Maoists abducted 300 students on February 16 and another 187 on February 20, although all were later set free. On February 25, the Maoists kidnapped 65 students and a teacher from a school in Rukum District of mid-western Nepal, but were released on March 4. According to INSEC, as of February 29, 71 students remained missing.

Why do Maoists Target Schools and Students?

4. According to the Maoists' Bheri-Karnali Regional Coordination Committee, the insurgents are recruiting children to achieve their target of 50,000 child militants by May 2004. Press reports indicate that the Maoist student wing, ANNISU-R, is flooding schools with the slogan of "one educational institution, one excellent militia". Additionally, a March 9 press report asserted that Maoists in four western districts had established training camps in public schools and that insurgents have "trained" 1,500 students. However, INSEC Chairman Subodh Pyakurel believes the Maoists seek only to indoctrinate the students and perhaps recruit them as porters, messengers and other manual labor or as "human shields" to protect themselves from attack by security forces. Pyakurel suggested that only a few of the abductees likely end up fighting for the Maoists. He opined that recruiting child militants probably is not part of the Maoists' mainstream agenda.

5. Pyakurel suggested that, ever since the October 2003 Doti incident, the Maoists increasingly have used schools as "safe havens". [Note. On October 13, 2003, security forces open fired on a school in which Maoists were conducting a "cultural program", resulting in the death of four students (reftel). End Note.] Public condemnation of the incident has caused security forces to refrain from attacking or operating near schools. Pyakurel believed that the unintended effect has been increased Maoist activity in schools. Schools have more space for Maoists to organize political and cultural programs, he averred, and students are more easily indoctrinated into Maoist philosophy and

potentially recruited into service. According to INSEC, the students typically are abducted, compelled to attend Maoist political and cultural programs, and then released. The abductees usually are held in Maoist-controlled villages or camps, Pyakurel said.

Human Rights Organizations Blast Maoist Atrocities

16. Many of Nepal's human rights organizations as well as the U.N. have severely criticized the Maoists for abducting students. Pyakurel indicated that INSEC has made it "very clear" to the Maoists that the student abductions should stop. Similarly, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has denounced such activities and has requested the Maoist leadership to prohibit its cadres from abducting children and damaging children's right to education and security. A Nepali NGO, Children Workers In Nepal (CWIN), also issued a press release in February urging the insurgents not to involve children under 18 years of age in perilous activities and to recognize schools as "zones of peace."

Comment

17. The claim by some Maoists that they intend to recruit 50,000 child militants by May 2004 is wildly unrealistic. Most able-bodied young adults have fled Maoist areas in order to avoid recruitment, leaving only children and the elderly behind. Although many Nepali pre-teens are too small to carry and use weapons, the insurgents apparently are targeting young people for indoctrination and future induction as armed cadre. The reluctance by Nepal's security forces to patrol near public schools (as a result of the October incident in Doti District) provides the Maoist leadership with additional leeway to accomplish its re-education goals. End Comment.